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ABSTRACT

The capabilities of a distance education system to enhance instructional programs of small schools by providing equity and increasing quality of educational opportunity, providing access to subject matter and subject matter experts, and providing interaction and joint activities with students in other schools are of sufficient merit to formulate and adopt educational policies which will give positive direction as small schools move forward. The educational policy options from among which educational decision makers may choose include preserving the small school as a conscious educational choice, capitalizing on delivery systems, preparing teachers to use distance education, allocating instructional resources, assigning responsibilities for material/media selection, simplifying logistics, and nurturing partnerships. Although most policies must be determined by local school boards, state educational units play a crucial role in influencing these policies by the way they meet responsibilities in determining state patterns of fiscal support, employment of statewide curriculum standards, regulations governing teacher certification/recertification, accreditation policies, provision of technical assistance to local districts, and ability to be a persuasive leadership force in articulating state educational goals. Thus the productive use of distance education will require not only sound and informed policy choices at each level independently but also joint and cooperative policy determinations. (NEC)

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THE Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory

PROGRAM REPORT

DISTANCE EDUCATION AND THE SMALL SCHOOL: POLICY ISSUES

Discussion Draft

Prepared for the Chief State School Officers
of the Northwest and Pacific

By

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DISTANCE EDUCATION AND THE SMALL SCHOOL:
POLICY ISSUES

Distance education gives great promise of offering a means for improving the quality of education in small, predominantly rural, schools. The current distance education movement relies heavily on the use of various electronic instructional technologies, and it is on the development and use of these devices that most of the attention has been centered. It may be because these devices and technologies are so marvelous and fascinating that insufficient attention seems to have been given to some of the educational policy issues which merit consideration.

The very terminology involved in the whole movement--"distance education," "small schools," and "policy"--perhaps needs at least minimal clarification. "Distance education" has many definitions, but for the purposes of this paper can simply mean any form of instruction/learning that does not involve primary face-to-face contact between teacher and learner, ranging from traditional correspondence course study to the most sophisticated electronic technologies. "Small schools" are those mostly-rural schools which are often characterized by extreme isolation ("4-wheel drive schools," one Northwest Chief calls them), sparsity of population, and limited curricular offerings--though no single one of these characteristics is necessarily present in every case. "Policy," as the term is used by the NWREL Center for State Education Policy Studies, means essentially direction. It is the center element of the principle-policy-procedure triad, to be distinguished from the other elements: principle being a statement of a basic assumption or belief from which educational policy is derived, and procedure being the

operating practices which carry out the policy--the educational direction--which has been chosen. It is this sense of consciously-chosen direction which often appears to be missing when practitioners become utterly engrossed in the technologies which undergird much of the distance education movement.

The educational policy options from among which educational decision makers may choose fall into several categories which can--at least for analytical purposes--be fairly clearly set forth as independent problems. In actual practice, of course, these segments of the overall problem have a way of becoming inextricably intertwined, but to clarify our initial thinking about them they can be separately treated as follows:

- o preserving the small school as a conscious educational choice;
- o capitalizing on "delivery systems;"
- o preparing teachers to use "distance education;"
- o allocating instructional resources;
- o assigning responsibilities for material/media selection;
- o simplifying the logistics;
- o nurturing partnerships.

Even a bare listing of these policy issues makes it clear that both the state and local levels of educational governance are involved. Most of the policies are ones which must be determined by the local school board, choosing from among the available policy options. Nevertheless, the SEA also plays a crucial role in influencing these policies by the way it meets its responsibilities in determining state patterns of fiscal support, its employment of statewide curriculum standards, its regulations governing teacher certification and recertification, its

accreditation policies, its provision of technical assistance to local districts, and perhaps most of all by its ability to be a persuasive leadership force in articulating state educational goals.

Therefore, the productive use of distance education in all of its forms to improve educational effectiveness in small schools will require not only sound and informed policy choices at each level independently--state and local--but also policy determinations which are made jointly and cooperatively.

Smallness as The Overriding Policy

Before distance education or any other technique or methodology may rationally be used to improve the small school, it would seem appropriate to clarify why the school is there in the first place. What is the desired policy? Would it be better to improve the school's program, or better just to solve the problem by getting rid of the school, harsh as that may sound?

It is probably inevitable that the state view and the local view will diverge on the question of preserving the small, often isolated, rural school at all costs. The state education authorities are generally charged by law with the responsibility for oversight of the statewide educational enterprise as a whole and must consider basic questions of adequacy, efficiency, and equity of the entire state system. Small schools, unfortunately but quite commonly, fail to measure up to all of the desired state standards. From the local standpoint, however, there may be legitimate considerations which seem to offer compelling reasons for keeping the small school operating--and it would be difficult to

maintain that these reasons are without legitimacy. There may well be community interests--social, economic, and even political--which would seem to dictate that the school ought to be kept open.

If the choice to maintain the small school is made on one of these "practical" grounds, however, rather than for purely educational reasons, the policy--the direction--chosen carries with it concomitant obligations to provide a wholly adequate instructional program for the students at a defensible cost. Here is where choices need to be made. If the continued maintenance of the school is considered to be temporary or transitional, given the demographic or economic forecasts, rather than a long-time commitment, then reliance on the less-expensive distance education technologies, such as correspondence courses or relatively simpler computer systems, would seem to be an appropriate application of the distance-education approach. If, on the other hand, the continuation of the school is seen as a long-term commitment, then heavier investment in capital equipment, related instructional materials, and inservice education of teachers would seem prudent.

But it is more complicated than that. Whatever depth of involvement is chosen, and whatever reasons are seen for continuing to maintain the school itself, the overarching policy decision to be made is this: what direction do we want the educational experience itself to go? Answering this questions leads to the next policy issue.

What is the Distance Education "Delivery System" Delivering?

One of the most common ways to describe any of the distance education approaches is to call it a "delivery system." That is a useful shorthand term; all of the technologies are designed not just to have an inherent

merit in themselves, but to be means to an end: delivering something useful or beneficial to the learners. What is being delivered? To what level of audience? For what use? Answers--satisfactory answers--to these questions cannot be given categorically; a number of complex policy issues are involved.

What is being delivered should, it seems apparent, be a function of what the student needs to advance toward adopted educational goals, not just what the technology is capable of delivering, or what the purveyor of the technology has to offer. Such educational choices have traditionally--and with good success--been made by teachers, working very closely with the individual student in accordance with the curricular guidelines adopted by the school. State requirements determine, board policies spell out, principals exert instructional leadership--all of this is true, but in the final analysis it is the teacher who makes the decisions, in close conjunction with the student involved.

Unfortunately, however, many delivery systems come packaged: you buy the system (or buy into the system) and you get the whole works. It may be good stuff--but it may not be appropriate. Delivery system packages, actually, are not all that different from the instructional packages which have traditionally been associated with textbooks--you get the textbook, the teacher's guide, perhaps workbooks, maybe even ditto masters! A few years ago, utilizing then-novel technologies or "teaching machines," publishers even came up with packages they called "teacher proof." (One must wonder whether these packages may not also have been student-proof.)

To raise the question regarding the appropriateness of what the delivery system may deliver is not to denigrate either the technology or its supporting materials. Rather, it is to emphasize the idea that policy choices about what will be taught need to be made by the responsible educational decision makers at all levels, not by the system itself.

The policy guidelines appropriate here, both at the state and the local level, would appear to be those which most clearly reflect the adopted curricular goals of the state and of the individual school system.

Testimony from users of some of the delivery systems indicates that choices about what is delivered are often made on grounds other than the relevance of the materials to curricular goals and student needs. One such user recently reported that a course in advanced mathematics, offered via satellite from a university center, was chosen and used not because there had been any specially-indicated need for it, but because it was what was available--and it was available not because the university had determined that it was needed in the rural schools of the region, but because they had a willing instructor who was a really great teacher!

It might seem that anything that could be done to expand the curriculum and enhance the learning opportunities available to students in the small school would be worthwhile, for the chief weakness of most such schools is precisely the paucity of curricular offerings. Many, if not most, small schools have their reasonable quota of bright and motivated students, competent and dedicated teachers, strong community support, and quite possibly sufficient financial resources to conduct a

good program. Almost without exception, however, they simply do not have a sufficient variety of courses and other learning experiences because they are not large enough to sustain the desirable range of curricular offerings. Very often, even good teachers are forced to teach out of their fields, to go beyond (or at least perilously close to the edges of) their certifiable competency. But offering through one or another of the distance education technologies just any course or other structured learning experience is of little real service to the students unless what is provided fits the pattern of curriculum content and emphases which coincides with the school's goals.

Local-level educational policy decisions are of extreme importance, of course, but the stakes here are too high for the choices to be left wholly to the vagaries of local preferences. Particularly in those states--and there are many--in which state curriculum standards have been consciously adopted as a centerpiece of the school reform strategy, it would appear that the random addition of courses just because they are available through the employment of distance education technologies would bear the closest state scrutiny.

Teacher Readiness

Even teachers who have come to their present positions by way of the finest teacher education programs are quite likely to be somewhat or almost totally unprepared to make fully competent use of all of the available distance education technologies and techniques. The more recent the preparation experience, the more likelihood there is that the teacher may have some competency in this area, but even the most recent graduates of the best preparation programs will be unlikely to have all of the skills they need.

The specific skills needed and the specific inservice preparation required are not the topics for discussion here, but it should be evident that some carefully thought-out policies are essential. Sequencing is one such policy issue: it seems almost axiomatic that sufficient inservice (if not preservice) preparation should be offered, and the work completed, before the new system is put into use. Frequently this does not seem to be the case. Often, one or a small group of enthusiastic teachers who have visited successful programs, attended a workshop, read success stories in the literature, or have been subjected to the blandishments of a persuasive vendor, are able to convince the school authorities that this distance education route is the one to be followed. Their commendable enthusiasm is often accompanied by a great sense of urgency: This is good! Let's get with it! So the machines and materials are purchased, and the system is introduced before the teachers as a whole are really ready. Training in advance of utilization, not just catch-as-catch-can, on-the-job training experience would seem to be a highly desirable policy.

If having the teachers really ready to employ the new methodologies is considered mandatory, so should be the constant upgrading of these skills as new technologies and techniques are introduced and older ones updated. This will be a costly investment, but not nearly as costly as it would be to invest in expensive machines and materials, and then find the teachers unwilling or unable to use them--remember what happened with teaching machines, classroom TV sets, and the first-introduced computers! A policy which clearly sets forth a commitment to adequate teacher training, and an equally firm commitment to furnish the necessary released time and other fiscal support would seem to be a necessity.

Allocating Instructional Resources

Funding for teacher inservice education represents a distinct decision to allocate certain fiscal resources to one aspect of the distance education program. Funding for the purchase of necessary equipment and materials--and of equal importance, for the upkeep, replacement, and enhancement of the system--represents another major (and continuing) expense. No one would be foolhardy enough to suggest any precise amount, formula, or percentage that an individual school district should allocate for these purposes, but a couple of policy issues may well be noted. First, policies might well be formulated and in place which state with some firmness what portion of the instructional materials budget will be set as an upper limit for the purchase of distance education capabilities. Otherwise, there will be an almost inevitable tendency to spend money for the newest, the most glamorous systems, the ones which have the strongest proponents and the most vocal supporters. A corollary policy might address the issue of minimums: some provision for assuring, as a matter of stated policy, that other instructional materials, such as textbooks, supplementary printed materials, and library appropriations would get their reasonable share of the budget.

Assigning Responsibilities

Assigning responsibilities for selection of media and materials for distance education can represent a fundamental educational policy decision. Perhaps the popular belief that school people are divided into two opposing camps--the technocrats and the book-centered teachers, or the machine people and the people-people--engaged in a constant state of

internecine warfare is overdrawn, but some tension surely does exist. The more conventional teachers blame their technically-oriented colleagues for becoming totally immersed in the technologies and forgetting the students; the persons deeply interested in the new technologies sometimes feel that the rest of the teachers are purposely dragging their feet and don't understand the "new stuff" just because they very stubbornly don't want to.

Pictures of such a raging conflict are overdrawn, of course, but there are tensions and there is a need for accommodation of differing points of view. The simplest policy--that all instructional-resources decisions will be joint decisions involving both viewpoints--may seem oversimplified, but the absence of such a policy can do nothing but continue to exacerbate the conflicts; the presence of such a policy of cooperative decision making at least has a chance of reducing the level of potential conflict.

Simplifying the Logistics

It has become something of a favorite pastime of persons writing about distance education to construct interesting what-if scenarios to explore some of the logistical problems which may emerge as programs of this sort become more common. Certification of teachers, for one example: how are states going to handle the regulatory problem of having a television instructor certified in State A teaching via satellite some students in a small school in State B, in which the teacher is not certified? Worse yet, what if the teacher is a highly regarded professor at a university, possessed of impeccable academic credentials and

regarded throughout the state and region for his or her superb instructional skills--but hasn't even had Ed. 101, Introduction to Education? Obviously, no certificate; hence, unqualified!

Or the matter of credit toward high school graduation--a student successfully completes an advanced mathematics course offered from another site--probably a university but maybe a cooperating private-industry training program. Who grants the credit? The work was not done under traditional circumstances, so-many hours of class time spread over a traditional semester, under the direct instruction of a certificated classroom teacher. How can the state accrediting authorities approve such a course, since the student's home school can't really grant credit that doesn't meet the standards?

There are many similar problems which can be imagined (which does not mean at all that they are wholly imaginary), all of which can be seen as serious barriers to the wide-spread adoption of distance education. Perhaps, however, they need not be insurmountable problems at all, if appropriate policies can be devised which make no attempt to spell out specific rules or procedures, but which open up avenues and clear the decks for action.

One such policy, applicable to either state or local level, as the legal situation might require, would be embodied in a statement which declares distance education programs to be experimental, and thus not subject to all of the strictures regarding certification of teachers, granting of credit only under closely regulated conditions, or imposing tuition charges on out-of-district or out-of-state students. An extension of the same idea could be embraced in a policy, presumably at

the state level, which simply allows variations from traditional programs to be granted (with prior approval of the appropriate authorities) a special-exemption status on a case-by-case basis.

Either of these policies, or versions of them, might well serve to alleviate the concerns and/or solve the problems which the logistical considerations might entail.

Partnerships

Distance education is not a go-it-alone proposition; the very nature of the enterprise almost guarantees that the school and its personnel will be involved in a variety of partnerships. The desirable partnerships embrace many kinds of potentially productive relationships between the individual school and other agencies: with universities or other sources of learning materials or technology-based services; with business/industry organizations and groups; with vendors and providers of technical services; with consortia, such as those sponsored by intermediate districts and other school improvement organizations; and with "networks," formal and informal, of professionals especially interested in a particular subject matter or a specific methodology or technology.

Successful partnerships need policy backing. The purpose of the partnership; the expectations each partner has of the other; the division of authority and responsibility; the conditions under which the partnership may be dissolved--all of these are policy matters.

The specifics of appropriate policies to govern the relationships with such diverse groups will vary considerably; but the establishment of

clear policy statements would seem to be a prime requisite for maintaining productive relationships.

Conclusion

The capabilities of a distance education system to enhance the instructional programs of small schools--providing equity and increasing quality of educational opportunity, providing access to subject matters and subject matter experts, providing interaction and joint activities with students in other schools, and all of the other desirable outcomes discussed in an earlier NWREL publication (DISTANCE EDUCATION: AN OVERVIEW)--are of sufficient merit to make it well worth the effort to formulate and adopt the educational policies which will give positive direction as small schools move forward.

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- Developing and disseminating effective educational products and procedures
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